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ABSTRACT

As a part of the National Study of American Indian Education, this document describes the background of the predominantly Eskimo community of Bethel, Alaska. Information was obtained via community observation, interviews, and questionnaires. Specific community characteristics described include location and physical features, population, facilities, economy, housing, health conditions, problems, and trends. The educational system -- physical plant, administration and finance, teaching staff, pupil population, curriculum, parental attitudes, and problems -- is also depicted. The report contains 2 maps. (AL)

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FINAL REPORT

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Community Background Reports

Series I

No. 11

Bethel, Alaska

John Connelly and
Ray Barnhardt
San Francisco State University
January, 1970

RC 004539

NATIONAL STUDY OF AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION

The attached paper is one of a number which make up the Final Report of the National Study of American Indian Education.

This Study was conducted in 1968-69-70 with the aid of a grant from the United States Office of Education, OEC-0-8-080147-2805.

The Final Report consists of five Series of Papers:

I. Community Backgrounds of Education in the Communities Which Have Been Studied.

II. The Education of Indians in Urban Centers.

III. Assorted Papers on Indian Education--mainly technical papers of a research nature.

IV. The Education of American Indians--Substantive Papers.

V. A Survey of the Education of American Indians

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PREFACE

During the period from mid March to the end of April, members of the San Francisco State University field team conducted research in Bethel, Alaska.

The four members of the team who were in residence in Bethel were John Connelly, Director of the Northwest Alaska Region of the National Study of American Indian Education, Ray Barnhardt, Carol Barnhardt. John Collier served as consultant to the field team.

In addition to observations made in the community, interview schedules and questionnaires prepared by the N.S.A.I.E. staff were used. Interviews of students, parents, teachers, administrators and others were carried out by the field team members. Draw-A-Man tests were also administered to first and fifth grade pupils.

The field team enjoyed the friendship and help extended by the people at Bethel and those concerned with education in this area. We wish to express to them our appreciation and thanks.

John Connelly
Ray Barnhardt

BETHEL

Location and Physical Features

Bethel is the trading, political, education, medical, communication and service center of a roughly 100,000 square mile region of Southwestern Alaska located eighty miles from the mouth of the Kuskokwim River, it is the farthest point up the river to which seagoing ships can travel (Map 1). Barging activities extend approximately a hundred miles up river beyond Bethel to supply the many Eskimo and Indian villages along the river. Anchorage, 419 miles by air is the nearest large city. Within the area, Bethel is the only community which by size and function could lay claim to identity as a city.

Bethel is situated in an area of flat treeless tundra abounding in many small lakes. The Kilbuck range of mountains is to the southeast.

Rainfall generally doesn't exceed 19-21 inches. Cold winter temperatures of -20° F to -30° F are made even more chilling by the characteristic winds. Winters are long and darkness falls early.

Population

About 86 percent of the 2000-2500 residents are Eskimo, the remainder whites. Only a part of these people, however, form a stable population--that is, residents who consider Bethel their permanent home. To Eskimo or Indian people, a village community is more often thought of as home. Non-Indians more often speak of Bethel in terms of a tour of duty, mission, contract or project, with some specific or approximate date of departure in mind. The Eskimo population, despite its pattern of periodic transiency between Bethel and various village sites, constitutes most of the present core population. It is in respect to this prospect for a stable core population that Bethel has significance as a regional educational center.

Bethel's population is youthful--the median age is 17 years and this area has a high birth rate.

This is a bi-lingual community with English and Eskimo spoken.

Facilities

Bethel was founded in 1855 by a group of Moravian missionaires.

It is presently incorporated as a 4th class city and is governed by the mayor and council system. There are seven council members, one of whom serves as mayor.

Bethel contains, in addition to a K-12 public school and a hospital, a public library which is used also as an adult education classroom, polling place, and meeting place for the Bethel Women's Club. A small museum is being planned.

Several churches are in the community: the Baptist Church, Episcopalian Church, Moravian Church, Pentecostal Church, Roman Catholic Church, and Russian Orthodox Church.

Economy

Bethel is the trade-commerce, and communication-transportation center for 42,000 square miles and 53 villages. The only high school and the only hospital for the area are situated here.

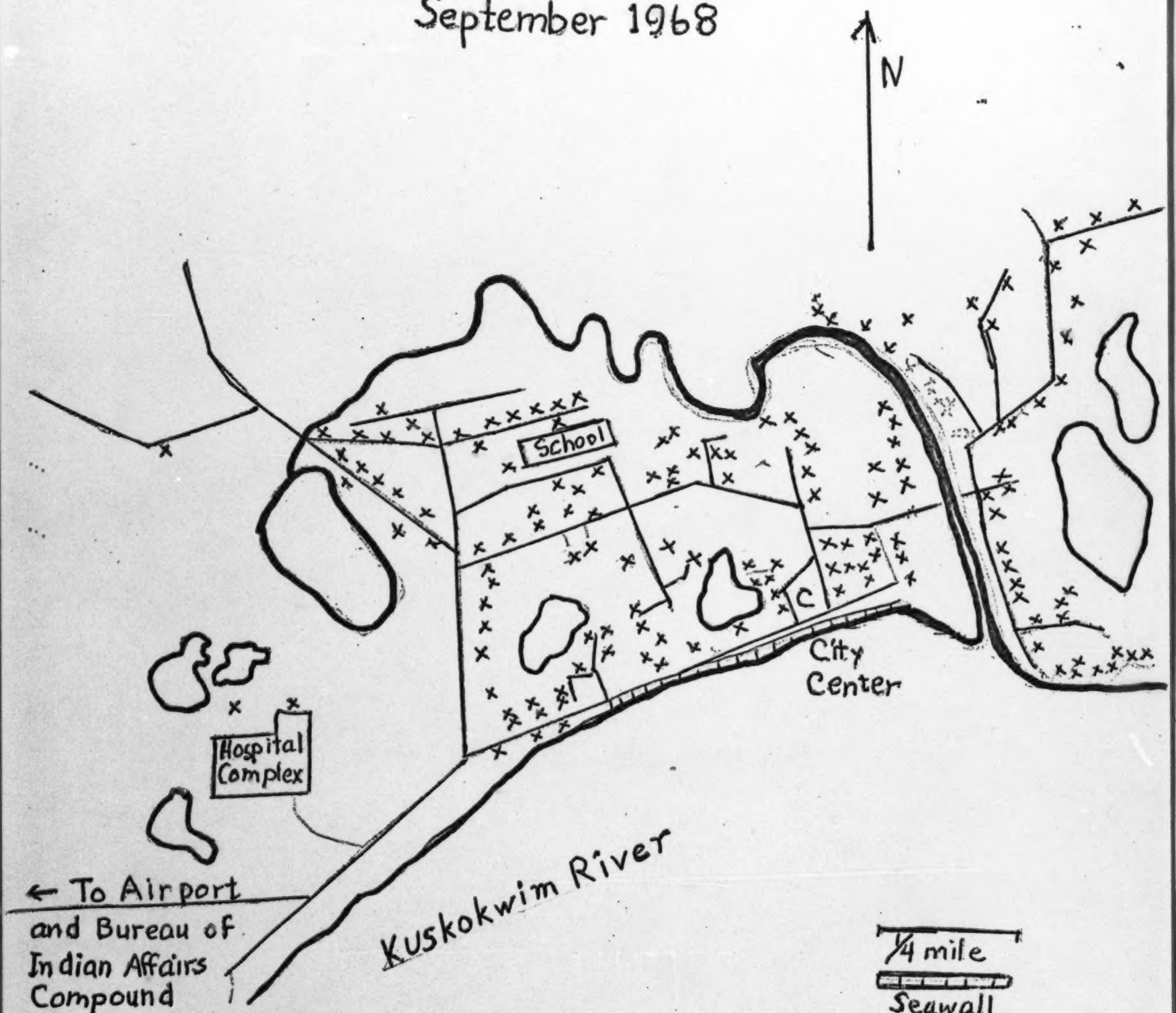
Regular jet plane connections to and from Anchorage serve to expand the provisioning service for the area beyond the seasonal period of sea shipment. Perhaps equally as significant to the area as the trade and commercial enterprise is the communication-transportation web provided by the busy small-plane operation out of Bethel to the small community sites up and down the Kuskokwim River, along the

BETHEL and ANGOON, ALASKA

Map 1

Bethel, Alaska

September 1968



Map 2

Bering Sea coast, up and down the Yukon River, and over the expanse of tundra. A two-way radio communication system among the village schools of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs is tied in with communications of the U.S. Public Health Service, all focusing at Bethel. Welfare activities and other federal and state agency services are entwined in a web of inter-community functions and contacts, with Bethel at its center.

Government agencies are the largest employers, with local private employers supplying work for less than 5 percent of the people. The Bureau of Indian Affairs and State Welfare funds augment income.

Traditional economic pursuits in the area were primarily fishing, hunting, and trapping--Mulrekhlagamiut, the Eskimo name for Bethel means a place to fish. Today, Eskimo men continue to pursue these activities using high-powered outboard motors or snowmobiles. They trade their fish and mink.

Although in the past they traditionally roamed the tundra for game, the Eskimos have settled around schools, armories, stores, and jet airports. Over 2000 live in villages in the greater Bethel community.

Prices for fresh foods imported from Seattle are high. Canned foods and manufactured goods are all imported.

Housing

Housing is very scarce and very poor for people in low paying jobs. Some of the worst housing in Alaska is located here. A low cost housing project is being developed for the unemployed or welfare villagers.

Health Conditions

A fully accredited hospital operated by the United States Public Health Service is located in Bethel. It is

a 42 bed unit. Six physicians, two dentists, a sanitarian, pharmacal administrator, eleven professional nurses, and six practical nurses are included on the staff.

The medical needs of the population are very great.[1] Infant mortality for 1965-67 was 104 per 1000 live births, and post neonatal mortality 79.3 per 1000. Diarrhea, respiratory disease, prematurity, congenital abnormalities, and meningitis account for the high infant death rate.

Childhood ailments create conditions that can affect children's schooling. Refractive errors, especially myopia, are prevalent. Mastoiditis is still common. Many older children have destroyed or damaged ear drums with resultant hearing loss.

Accidents, including drowning, burns, and gunshot wounds account for 21 percent of all deaths. One fourth of these accidents are associated with alcohol abuse.

Although tuberculosis is declining, it still exacts a heavy toll and accounts for 16 percent of all hospital admissions and 12 percent of all deaths. Mental disease, dental caries, cancer, anemia, rheumatic heart disease and arthritis are significant problems. Diabetes mellitus and coronary artery disease are rare.

Trends and Problems

Although over twenty separate state and federal agencies are located in Bethel the pool of trained specialists for maintaining their operations is quite low and it has been necessary to bring in personnel. Major activities such as the Federal Aviation Agency,

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[1] Data from U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Public Health Service, Division of Indian Health.

the Public Health Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs have found it necessary to provide a good portion of employee housing. Although it has been the policy of the State Department of Education not to provide housing, the housing shortage has required taking action in this regard even with the present school. Lodging for transients is severely limited. Major repair, replacement, space and maintenance needs already bear down heavily upon the Public Health Service Hospital. Harbor and airport facilities are already in need of expansion. Welfare, occupational training facilities, employment counseling and guidance services, and housing to meet the needs of native peoples already moving into Bethel are badly needed. A native population explosion taking place over the whole of the Kuskokwim delta area has increased village populations and had consequent effects upon Bethel.

Bethel is aware of its prospects and problems. The community shows the determination and tenacity characteristic of the frontier mind set. These are people who have the poise and wisdom needed to survive in a harsh natural setting.

EDUCATION

Introduction

Bethel has had continuous schooling available in general ever since 1885, but the orientation has been in varying directions. A Moravian mission school was established in 1885; it was succeeded in 1933 by a Bureau of Education/Bureau of Indian Affairs school, and in 1947 by a school under the Territory (later State) of Alaska.

The present Bethel school is a state operated school with 81 kindergarten children, 405 children in grades 1 through 6, 240 students in grades 7 through 12 and 57 children in a special education program.

In addition to the state school in Bethel, village schools are available.

With few exceptions, village schools within the Bethel Region are conducted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and are 1-8 grade schools. Except for those few village students who can obtain housing in Bethel by living with relatives or in foster homes, the village students who go on to high school are sent to BIA boarding school at Mount Edgecombe in Southeast Alaska, Chemawa (Oregon) and Chilocco (Oklahoma).

Physical Plant

The Bethel school is situated in a modern L shaped plant, one section of which houses the High School, the other, the elementary classes. Built adjacent to the national guard armory the school is able to share use of the armory gymnasium. The special education program is carried on in six individual modern self-contained classrooms adjacent to the main school facility.

Children walk to school, the bus picking up those few who live two miles or more away. This is a day school, no boarding facilities are available.

The school lacks an adequate library. The Bethel High School has not been accredited by the Northwest Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges.

Administration and Finance

Forty-six teachers, a superintendent, an elementary and a secondary principal, conduct the school.

Although there is a local school advisory committee, it is without decision making authority and is not greatly effective. Perhaps more influential in affecting decisions is the Bethel City Council, which on selected issues has taken aggressive stands and gained hearings from state school officials and public officials in Anchorage and Juneau. The continuous operational decision making for the school is made on the state level and represented locally by the superintendent.

Teachers

Forty-six teachers are employed at Bethel. They are hired by the State of Alaska through the Anchorage office of the Alaskan Rural Schools Office. The local school is hoping to participate in the interviewing of teacher applicants in the future.

Teachers in the state system work a nine month year. Up to now, special preparation of teachers to work with Eskimos has been absent. Alaska Methodist University, Anchorage, and the University of Alaska in Fairbanks are developing programs for teachers who will be working with Alaskan natives.

The teacher turnover rate is very high. Generally few stay more than two years. A good many of the teachers are new to Alaska.

Housing and the high cost of living are serious problems. In 1967 Bethel teachers themselves made a survey of teacher housing and living costs. They found that only two of twenty-nine units studied were not sub-standard; they found one flush toilet (honey buckets used elsewhere), no laundry facilities, barrel or cold gravity feed for water, old utilities and an absence of storage space. Rent ranged from $172-$394 with utilities and an average of 39 percent of gross income was spent for substandard housing.

The average teacher earned a little over $9000 a year but the cost of living was at least 50 percent higher than that of Seattle.

Most of the staff displays minimal cross cultural sensitivity. People are in a low level state of culture shock and few stay long enough to become familiar with Eskimo culture. Teachers come largely because of the appeal of hunting and fishing in the area.

One high school teacher of science is an Eskimo, native of Bethel.

Pupils

There are approximately 780 pupils enrolled in grades K-12 and 6 special education classes. Ninety percent of the pupils are Eskimo.

Although a good percentage of Bethel children do not speak Eskimo, newcomers to the community have very little English. Most children enter school with a limited knowledge of English. The frequency of hearing and visual defects also affects the school experience.

Curriculum

The curriculum is State prescribed with only a few teachers utilizing local conditions. There is no bi-lingual program and all instruction is in English.

One first grade class in Bethel is using an experimental program, the Alaska Reader Series developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the State Department of Education. Pictures of native children are incorporated into the texts.

Instruction is provided in electronics, language arts, social studies, business education, mathematics and science. As noted earlier, the High School is not accredited.

Parents

Bethel parents represent the first generation to have attended high school at all. On the whole, the educational level is low. Most of the village adults have had only two or three years of schooling.

There is a positive attitude about the school and strong approval for establishing a regional high school in the area.

There is no Parent Teacher Association in Bethel.

Trends and Problems

Present plans conceptualize a system of regional high schools to be operated by the State of Alaska with boarding facilities provided by the federal government. Bethel has been designated as a center for one of these schools. Although it plans to develop this system of public high schools, there seems little likelihood that the State of Alaska will take over the supervision and operation of the extensive village-schools system of the BIA. Present BIA administrative offices and housing are likely to continue to provide educational and other services in Bethel for some years. A reorientation of village school graduates to a state-operated high school

at Bethel rather than to continued schooling in remote BIA boarding schools will require adaptations, accommodations and significantly new sets of operational interrelationships, currently lacking.

The Sitka Conference on Alaska Native Secondary Education of December 1968, reveals the complexity of the problems involved in coordinating the operations of local district, city, borough, state, private, and federal jurisdictions. A State of Alaska bond issue for regional high schools was passed but was not expendable until such time as federal action was taken to provide dormitory space for students. The issue then arose as to whether dormitory operation shall be local, state or federal. Although all three agencies had reached accord on the matter of having the high school and having the living facilities at Bethel, because the crying need for educational services in the area made it a priority, this issue remained unresolved, because of the uncertainty that the federal funds for the dormitory would be appropriated. This lack of coordination and common thrust threatened to keep the high school from being built.

The following testimony illustrates the problem:

> STATE SENATOR, NICK BEGICH: We in Alaska passed a bond issue two years ago, or three years ago almost now, of $5 million, $3 million for Bethel, and yesterday there was some doubt raised about the dormitories at Bethel, about the operation of the dormitories. It was our feeling in the legislature, just for one second of background--this is not a speech--that we'd build the high school and you would put up the money for the dormitories. The question was raised by the Commissioner of Education, and the Attorney General ruled that the state could not operate. Is it the intention of the BIA to put that dormitory there and operate the dormitory there if they put one there?

MR. CHARLES ZELLERS, ASST. COMM. FOR EDUCATION, BIA: Yes, it is our intention to put one there and it's our intention if the present plan is allowed to go through to take part of this $9.6 million with which to do it because we agree that Bethel is one of the higher priorities and we ought to build the dormitory there because the state does have the money for the school.

MR. BEGICH: Who would operate the dormitory? That's the question that the Commissioner rasied yesterday. The BIA?

MR. ZELLERS: Not as far as I would be concerned, it wouldn't, no. It would be the same as the one that we have at Nome, but maybe we would have to discuss this further.

MR. C. R. HARTMAN, COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION, ALASKA: Mr. Chairman, I did not raise that question. I think the Senator might not have understood. We were talking about the funding for the dormitory, the state is not able to release the bond funds until funds are available from the federal government to build the dormitory. At no time has there been a question as to who would operate the dormitory. The state would operate it or we would contract with a local district to operate it.

MR. TED TAYLOR, DEPUTY COMM. INDIAN AFFAIRS: As a broad philosophical point, this is the attitude of the Bureau, we want the state to operate it and we will turn it over for that purpose.

MR. BEGICH: I just wanted to make sure the point is clear because there was a question concerning this.

MR. ZELLERS: What we would like to do is to use $6 million of the present funds or approximately that amount to build that dormitory. If we're not permitted to do that, our next first opportunity to request funds for that dormitory will be 1971 and there is no assurance that we will be able to get the funds then.

MR. BEGICH: Mr. Chairman, I raised all these questions because I hoped that the gentlemen could not only give your committee the benefit of their testimony in writing, which has just come to my attention today, but so it could be given to the President of the Senate so we could have advantage of it to plan a bonding program too to coordinate with your efforts here; and frankly, it has been difficult to get some information and there has been a lack of communication on everyone's part. . . ."[1]

The single example simply sharpens realization of the one matter but must be recognized as but one of a hundred or more other operational considerations. Bethel is a small community, really a frontier town on the huge expanse of tundra, already thrust into the contemporary moment of jet age transportation, electronic communication, highly specialized medical services, modern construction and national and international commercial involvements. The establishment of a regional high school brings into the city of Bethel a modern school plant, including residence accommodations which, once started, no matter what the initial size, must continue toward the accommodation of eight hundred to a thousand students--the estimated present need of the region.[2]

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[1] Conference on Alaska Native Secondary Education, Sitka, Alaska, December 19 and 20, 1968, p. 122-123.

[2] C. R. Hartman at Sitka gave a figure of 800 students now leaving the area for high school, p. 12.

This in turn would require thirty to fifty teaching, supervisory, and administrative positions and an undetermined number of other staff for dormitory and school operation and maintenance.

The point to be made is that Bethel is not a frontier community in process of developing toward an ultimate regional community, but a community being rapidly converted and posed with the predicament of having its approximately 2000 population increased practically overnight by 1000 teen-age students and the supporting population required to serve them. The implications of this change go far beyond simply the regional high school proposal. They denote concurrent "crash" housing, health, sanitation, water supply, government, recreation and numerous other considerations for the city.